School board dissects bond

A committee presented $453.5 million in improvements for the November ballot after two months of deliberations.

By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post

New schools, roofs, boilers, playgrounds and athletic fields are among the items that would be funded by a $453.5 million school bond likely to be considered by Denver voters in November.

Denver's school board Thursday formally received the bond recommendation by a citizens committee that has been researching how much is needed to pay for capital projects in Denver Public Schools, the state's oldest school district.

But some questioned whether it was prudent to spend the planned $37 million to refurbish North High School.

The committee spent two months parsing through the needs and whittling down the figure from more than $700 million.

The committee identified $273.3 million in critical maintenance to bring the district up to health and safety codes and for basic repairs — including replacing 100 roofs and 20 boilers.

About $109.5 million will pay for new schools and programs, including $3.4 million for preschool expansion, $20 million for new school programs such as charter schools, $48.5 million for a new K-8 and high school in Green Valley Ranch and $37.6 million for renovating North High School.

Board member Jeannie Kaplan asked whether the committee considered not fixing North, which has had dwindling enrollment and problematic academics.

Bill Mosher, co-chairman of the citizens committee, said he questioned why the district wasn't merging North with West High School, and co-chairwoman Dawn Bookhardt also questioned whether it made sense to move forward on an overall $178 million master plan for a school that is in such disrepair.

"One thing I realized is North has a huge historical significance," Bookhardt said. "There are several communities that are connected to it."

Added co-chairwoman Denise Maes, "It would be a political nightmare for the district to mothball North High School."

Sarah Hughes, DPS administrator working with the committee, said census trends show the northwest Denver community is growing but that people there are not pleased with the middle- and high-school options. She thinks academic reforms and refurbishing North will change those opinions and bring more students to the school.

The bond also would provide $21.2 million for technology and nearly $50 million for "academic enhancements" — including $29 million for playgrounds at 37 schools, $12.8 million for artificial turf at five high schools and libraries at four schools.
Community meetings have been set for this month to discuss the bond before the board votes in September. The amount equates to a raise in taxes of $6 per $100,000 valuation on a home.

"That's just a remarkable deal for voters to get this kind of financial deal for the district," Mosher said. "We think it's justifiable to meet the needs of the district."